

11 Biggest Mistakes Sales Professionals Make in Their Presentations

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Like Hollywood actors, sales professionals put themselves and their companies on the line with every word, taking a risk in the hope of a favorable outcome. Just like actors, even the best, most experienced sales professional benefits from some script review, rehearsal, and coaching.

Here are the 11 most common mistakes that I see on the sales stage and what you can do to avoid them:

1. Unclear Thinking

Want clarity? Imagine that a busy executive says, “You have exactly ten minutes to tell me what you want me to know about your company.” At any stage of the sales process, you should know in advance what your prospect is really asking. The real question is, “What do I need to know about how your company can improve our company? Will your products or services solve a problem, create new opportunities, increase savings, maximize earnings, simplify our processes, develop our human capital, or increase market share?” At this point, the executive is more interested in their company than in yours. Accomplish this, and you have the opportunity to present your options more formally.

2. Talking Too Much

The key to connecting with a client is conversation and asking questions. The quality of client information received depends on the quality of your questions, as well as waiting for and listening to the answers! A successful encounter early in the sales process should probably consist mostly of open-ended questions—the kind that require essay answers rather than just yes or no. And never rush on with preprogrammed questions that indicate you have paid no attention to the answer you just received!

Your job is to work closely with the team or champion who will give you information. Do your research so that your questions about their company are well thought out. Do not be afraid to go deeper. If they want to increase sales, ask, “By how much?” “In the same market or expanding to a new one?” Do they want to improve morale? Ask, “What are the signs that make this a priority?” “What have you done before?” “How great a success has it been?” Will they be upgrading technology? Ask, “How long have you been investigating options?” You need to determine are they interested or desperate?

3. Wrong Structure

To keep a prospect or senior leadership interested, you have to prove this premise: “Your company’s condition will be dramatically improved when you do business with us.”

Your talking points and presentation structure will be better received if they are not structured around your company. The “This is who we are, what we do, our unique methodology, and who we do business with” conversation or presentation outline is not likely to get you very far. Use all the information you received from your questions to help them know you were listening. Structure the conversation or presentation around their interests, challenges, or opportunities.

Put as many of their words as possible into your presentation. Your prospects will not disagree with themselves. Yes, you will be talking about your company, your satisfied clients, and what is unique about you as a way to prove that you can appeal to what they are interested in, solve their challenges, and maximize their opportunities.

4. Not Memorable Stories

People rarely remember your exact words. Instead, they remember the mental images your words inspire. Support your key points with vivid, relevant, client success stories. Help them see a movie in their minds by using your satisfied clients as memorable characters. What was their starting situation? Their problem and one your prospect can relate to? How are their results since you worked with them?

The best stories are third-party endorsements that have your clients using much more glowing statements than you could if the words were your own. Endorsement stories should be like a good Hollywood movie: memorable characters that your prospects can identify with, vivid dialogue, and a dramatic lesson about the benefits of doing business with you. When telling those client stories, give them a back story, add drama, and use actual dialogue that has been edited. Director Alfred Hitchcock said, “A movie is like life with all the dull parts left out.”

“When the Vice President of Sales first called, he said, “Help. We heard you are the right person (or company) to help us solve” Always use the client’s words.

What we did was Here you insert the solution or methodology your prospect is most likely interested in. This can be delivered in your own words.

The success is also presented in the prospect’s words. “If John were here, he would say, ‘We would not have believed it possible that we could have You can’t go wrong choosing this company.’”

5. No Emotional Connection

Your customer or client justifies doing business with you for analytical reasons; what gives you the edge—what I like to call the “unfair advantage”—is creating an emotional connection. Build this emotional connection by incorporating stories with characters that they can relate to, using the word you as often as possible and talking from their point of view. Make it obvious that you are their advocate. Congratulate them on their success. Thank them, not for their time, but for the opportunity to present your solution. Don’t say, “I will talk about”; instead say, “What you will hear is . . .” As you put together each segment of your presentation, ask yourself, “Why would they care about this?” If they wouldn’t, leave it out, or reword it so that they will. Remember, as they listen, their unspoken question is, “What’s in this for us?” Logic makes us think; emotion makes us act.

6. Wrong Levels of Abstraction

Get on the same wavelength with your prospects. For first contacts with executives, describe what your company can do for them from a big picture view—a high level of abstraction. Be able to change to go deeper if their questions lead you there. With middle managers, discuss exactly how you can work together—a medium level of abstraction. If you are dealing with IT professionals, use the lowest level of abstraction: plenty of data, facts, and figures. In other words, speak the same language, or bring an associate who can. Maximize each meeting.

7. No Pauses

Good music and good communication both contain changes of pace and pauses. As counterintuitive as it may seem, you actually connect on the silence. This is when your audience, even if it is one person, digests and reflects on what they have heard. If you rush on at full speed to squeeze in as much information as possible, chances are your prospects will remember less. Remember the rule, “Say less, say it well.” Give your clients enough time to ask a question or reflect. Pauses allow pondering and understanding.

8. Hmm, Ah, Err, You Know, So, Right

Non-words and low quality words usually fill the space where there needs to be silence. How often have you heard a presenter begin each new thought with “Now!” or “Um” or “So” as they scan notes or figure out what comes next. Rehearse in front of your sales manager or colleagues, giving them permission to call out whenever you hem or haw. Video and audio-record yourself, and note any digressions. You will never fix problems you are unaware of.

9. Weak Opening

Engage your audience with a powerful, relevant opening that includes them. For example, “You have an awesome responsibility,” or “Congratulations on your company’s recent success.” Then focus on their needs: increasing sales, reducing errors, cutting overhead, expanding their market, increasing their digital footprint, or perfecting their sales presentations, whatever your product can help your prospect do. Do not thank them for their time. Thank them for the opportunity to discuss how you could well be the option they are looking for.

10. Weak Closing

After you have reviewed your key ideas, answered their questions, made your suggestion for the next logical step, and thanked them for the opportunity, it is time to make your last words linger. For your concluding thought, pick a strong, positive sentence that you absolutely want embedded in their minds. Just like the P.S. in a sales letter, you do not want to introduce a new idea. This will be a reinforcement of one of your main advantages or benefits; e.g., “Remember, 157 profitable quarters,” or “99% of the Fortune 100 do business with us,” or “We are large enough to satisfy all your requirements and small enough that you will be a valued client.”

11. Lack of Specificity.

Specificity builds your credibility and helps position you above your competition.

What is the number one crime against your credibility? It’s a single, suddenly-popular buzzword that reminds me of fingernails screeching on a blackboard every time I hear it: stuff. It means debris, and your products are not. However, let’s look at the others. Thing is not much better than debris. Are there three things that will make you successful? Or is it three strategies, techniques, habits, ideas, philosophies, or action steps?

How about tons and bunches? Can you really get a ton of ideas? Do you leave the trade show with bunches of business cards? More likely it is three dozen.

You can’t tell a prospect, “With our program, you will really grow your business.” Instead, “There are no guarantees; however, our last three clients increased sales an average of 32% in seven months.”

Avoid these, and you’re on your way to becoming a star of the sales world, delivering a dazzling performance every time.

About Patricia Fripp

Companies hire Patricia Fripp when they want to gain a competitive edge by mastering their important conversations and presentations.

She is a Hall of Fame keynote speaker, executive speech coach, sales presentation skills and on-line learning expert.

If your message must be memorable, your presentations powerful, and you sales successful, Patricia Fripp can help.



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